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Citation for published version:

Allan, S & Robinson, CV 2019, 'The flexible curriculum: redesigning an online MBA in response to the changing needs of students and businesses', Paper presented at Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Conference 2019, Manchester, United Kingdom, 14/05/19 - 15/05/19.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

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The flexible curriculum: redesigning an online MBA in response to the changing needs of students and businesses

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Abstract

This paper outlines the process, framework and rationale used to redesign a large-scale online MBA in response to changing market demands. The design process was anchored in extensive research with students, alumni and business leaders, and was guided by a newly developed curriculum ethos and themes. This research provides evidence of a shift in market expectations – including increasing demand for leadership, decision-making, ethical practice and innovation – and proposes a way in which institutions can realign their curricula with the needs of current and future societies.

Introduction

Reports of [the death of the MBA](#) may have been exaggerated, but the literature on its perceived shortcomings is considerable. Moreover business schools are accused of failing to create empathetic and ethical practitioners, leading to urgent demands that they re-examine their curricula, and even [ask themselves why they exist at all](#). Against this backdrop Edinburgh Business School (EBS) embarked on redesigning its MBA curriculum during the summer of 2017. The school's aim was to investigate what capabilities students and businesses required, not only to face up to the challenges of today's world but to anticipate the needs of future societies.

Research

Firstly, extensive research was conducted via specialist consultants (CarringtonCrisp), comprising: a survey with prospective students, enrolled students and alumni (447 responses/79 countries); a survey of business figures (70 responses/15 countries); two focus groups with students; and in-depth interviews with eight business leaders.

Key findings included the following:

- Employers saw leadership, strategy, critical thinking, project management and change management as the capabilities future MBA graduates must possess.
- In this context there was demand among students and alumni for a broad set of entrepreneurship skills (i.e. creativity and innovation), rather than focusing specifically on new venture creation.
- Demand for more technical aspects of finance and accounting were seen as diminishing, replaced by a need for more strategic risk analysis and decision-making skills.
- A need to help students develop the resilience required to operate in volatile and unpredictable business contexts, and for institutions to respond to these conditions by constantly re-evaluating and refreshing their curricula.

Full findings were discussed by the school's academic team, board, senior management and other stakeholders via a series of collaborative workshops.

Ethos and themes

To provide clear structure and alignment, two key aspects of the curriculum were defined first: the curriculum *ethos* or overarching mission statement; and four *themes*, the common academic threads that run through all core courses (Biggs 2003, Gosper and Ifenthaler 2014). Drafts of the ethos and themes were discussed further via staff focus groups before finalisation.

The *ethos* centred on the need to prepare managers for professional leadership roles in global, dynamic and multi-cultural contexts and to help them develop the core knowledge, skills and attributes required to respond to rapid technological, societal and environmental change.

The four *themes* that ran through all modules were:

1. An innovative, creative mindset
2. Business leadership
3. Flexibility and adaptability to dynamic international contexts
4. Ethical and sustainable practice

Core curriculum

The previous MBA curriculum had separate modules in accounting and finance; instead the redesigned curriculum provided a single module in this area, with a strong emphasis on decision-making tools and techniques. The soft-skills element was expanded to include two modules, one devoted specifically to leadership and the other to people management.

Six new core modules were developed:

1. *People, Work and Organisations* develops a critical awareness of people-management concepts at multiple levels across dynamic and international contexts.
2. *Economics for Business* develops a systematic approach to decision-making and the ability to interpret economic information while dealing with uncertainty.
3. *Strategic Marketing* provides the required tools and frameworks to make proactive marketing decisions that take best advantage of market conditions.
4. *Financial Decision-making* enables students to analyse and critique financial information and make more informed and effective decisions.
5. *Leadership Theory and Practice* develops a critical appreciation of the role of leadership across diverse organisational, societal and cultural contexts.
6. *Delivering Successful Projects* helps managers to conceive of, plan and deliver projects, supporting successful execution while managing multiple trade-offs.

A capstone course, *Developing and Executing Strategy*, was also developed to support the holistic integration of concepts across the six core courses and to develop students' ability to critically analyse and act on complex issues.

Impact and contribution

The redesigned curriculum attempts to address several problems identified in the literature on MBAs, including a need for leadership and people-management skills, the ability to deal with complexity and change, and to integrate business disciplines to address complex problems (Varela et al. 2013, Laud and Johnson 2013). It also proposes embedding creativity, ethics and

sustainability across all courses, again in response to critiques of MBA curricula (Glen 2014, Jarvis 2011). By outlining a process, framework and rationale for redesigning an online MBA curriculum, this paper proposes ways in which business schools can respond positively to the challenges they face and realign with the changing needs of society.

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